

VZCZCXRO6112
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0597/01 1491550
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 291550Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4997
INFO RUEHHE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3847
RHMCSSU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000597

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, McDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2019

TAGS: OVIP PREL PGOV PINR LE SY IS IR

SUBJECT: LEBANON: VICE PRESIDENT TELLS SPEAKER BERRI U.S.
TO STAKE POLITICAL CAPITAL ON MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Vice President Biden told Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri that his May 22 visit to Lebanon was designed to send a strong message from the Obama administration that the U.S. supports a sovereign, independent Lebanon with strong institutions and was committed to achieving a comprehensive Middle East Peace with the help of Arab friends. The Vice President underscored the U.S. intention to pursue dialogue and engagement with countries in the region, including Syria and Iran. Speaker Berri was supportive of the Obama administration's initiatives and encouraged "dialogue with everyone." Berri was not optimistic, however, that the new Israeli government would support these efforts. "All Arabs," on the other hand, were ready for peace, Berri pronounced.

¶2. () Berri claimed that if his March 8 coalition won Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections, it would seek the participation of others, including current majority March 14 leader Saad Hariri, in the next government. The Vice President reiterated U.S. support for Lebanon's state institutions and urged the Lebanese to determine their own fate without bowing to the influence of hostile or friendly outsiders. End summary.

¶3. (SBU) During his May 22 visit to Lebanon, Vice President Joe Biden held a frank discussion with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri at the latter's residence in the Beirut area of Ain El Tineh. On the U.S. side, the Ambassador, National Security Advisor to the Vice President Antony Blinken, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph McMillan, Senior Advisor to the Vice President for the Middle East and South Asia Herro Mustafa, National Security Council Director for Syria, Lebanon and North Africa McDermott, and Embassy notetaker attended also. On the Lebanese side, Speaker Berri was accompanied by Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, Lebanese Ambassador to the United States Antoine Chedid, and Advisor to the Speaker Ali Hamdan.

COMPREHENSIVE MIDDLE EAST PEACE
INVOLVES EVERYONE

¶4. (C) In his first visit to the Middle East region as Vice President, Vice President Biden informed opposition-aligned Berri that that new Obama administration was "willing to risk its political survival" to achieve a comprehensive Middle East peace. The Vice President expressed the U.S. desire to become a "catalyst for positive movement" and to make it clear to both Palestinians and Israelis that a two-state solution was "the only solution." Biden reiterated the Obama administration's position supporting a two-state solution and no new settlements. A significant part of that "positive movement," he continued, included many elements of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

¶5. (C) Speaker Berri agreed with Vice President Biden and asserted that "all Arabs" were ready for peace. Conversely, Berri was not optimistic about the newly-elected Netanyahu administration in Israel. Berri accused Israel of always making excuses, such as refusing to fully adhere to UN Security Council resolutions (including 425 and 1701) or to

withdraw from the Lebanese village of Ghajar. Despite the complications imposed by Israel, President Obama's plan to use dialogue as a key tool to reach agreement, Berri said, was "absolutely" the best roadmap. Berri encouraged the Obama administration to undertake dialogue with everyone and questioned why the administration had stopped talking to Syria -- a signal based on the recent renewal of sanctions on Syria.

16. (C) The Vice President agreed with the need for dialogue,

BEIRUT 00000597 002 OF 002

and said it remained the administration's policy to engage Syria despite the recent renewal of sanctions. He also urged the GOL and other Arab governments to adopt the same practice. If Fatah and Hamas do not talk with each other, or if Arab countries do not talk with Israel, or Sunni Arabs do not talk with Shia Arabs, there is little that the United States can do, the Vice President said. The Vice President pushed back on Berri's accusation by saying: "You tell me who to speak to, but you don't speak to the Israelis." The Vice President expressed appreciation for Berri's endorsement of the Obama-Biden approach of engaging with all states and noted that it is a policy Lebanon itself should consider adopting.

IRAN HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

17. (C) Speaker Berri urged the United States to engage in a serious dialogue with Iran. Iran, he believed, could play a useful role in reducing or eliminating the existence of terrorism and terror organizations in Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Berri argued that President Obama's Nowruz message to the Iranian people and government in March received a positive response from "the most powerful Iranian figure, Ayatollah Khamenei," he said. Berri assessed that when Khamenei responded to President Obama's message, in a speech delivered before a staunchly conservative audience in the Iranian city of Mashhad, Khamenei outlined an agenda for dialogue with the United States

18. (C) The Vice President assured Berri that the U.S. administration understood Khamenei's message and planned to pursue engagement, not only with Iran, but Syria as well. It was other Arab governments, however, that continued to advise the U.S. not to talk with Iran, he noted. The Vice President added that the safety and security of the U.S. was dependent on the elimination of terrorism in other parts of the world.

LEBANON PART OF THE PUZZLE

19. (C) Turning to Lebanon's domestic situation, Speaker Berri predicted that only one to two parliamentary seats (out of a total of 128) would determine the new majority and minority blocs after the June 7 parliamentary elections. Lebanon was based on "consensual democracy," Berri explained, and it would be necessary to have all sides represented in the new government. Berri, a member of the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition, claimed that if his coalition won the majority in the election, it would seek to govern with the participation of March 14 coalition leader Saad Hariri. Berri said a "unified Lebanon" was not far away, but it was important for the region to reach the same level also.

10. (C) The Vice President stated unequivocally that no one should make decisions about Lebanon except the Lebanese. He reiterated his statement made earlier in the day to Lebanese President Michel Sleiman that the U.S. had "no intention, desire or instinct" to push for anything in Lebanon other than free and fair elections. The Vice President continued that strong Lebanese institutions would be essential to that process and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to provide assistance to these institutions to continue building their capabilities. Lebanon, an important part of the regional puzzle, "must maintain its sovereignty and independence" through strong state institutions without allowing outsiders (hostile or friendly) dictate Lebanon's politics, the Vice President asserted.

11. (U) The Office of the Vice President has cleared this message.

SISON